DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 182 687 CS 005 235

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TITLE Ethnography as a Methodology in the Study of the Parental Role in Reading.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 11p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (23rd, Boston, MA, November 1-3, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education: *Ethnography: Observation: *Parent Role: *Reading Development: *Reading Research: *Research Design: *Research Methodology

ABSTRACT

The study of the role parents play in the reading development of their children requires a methodology that is unobtrusive, humane, objective, and natural. Ethnography, with its corresponding technique of participant observation, offers these characteristics. The distinctive features of an ethnographic research design include: formulation of the research problem, selection of an area or society to study, an exploratory phase of ethnography, and the hypothesis testing phase. This last should make use of five basic guidelines: multiplicity of instances, of indexes, of tests, of hypotheses, and of phase-specific conditions. Systematic use of the methodology and design of ethnography should be very helpful in exploring the role of parents in reading. (TJ)

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ED182687

Ethnography as a Methodology in the Study of the Parental Role in Reading

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the College Reading Association

Boston, Massachusetts
November 1, 1979

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How do parents play a role in the reading acquisition of their children? What attitudes and values permeate the thinking of parents as they respond to the school reading program? Can parents play an effective part in the reading education process both at home and in school? These are some of the broad questions that reading research is being required to examine closely in the present and coming decades. The impetus for examining parental influences and capabilities comes from a variety of political and economic conditions:

1. Accountability and minimum competency testing have brought about increased awareness of the status of reading achievement and a growing concern on the part of parents that their children may be short-changed in skill areas necessary for success in adulthood.

2. Legislation, such as Public Law 94-142, gives parents of handicapped children the knowledge and tools to guarantee that their children receive the best possible schooling. Parents now have some "say so" into the decisions governing schooling. These rights will

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ultimately extend to typical children whose parents will profit from the expertise acquired by the actively participating parents of the educationally handicapped.

3. As funds for support personnel in schools diminish, wise school administrators and faculties encourage parents to become active partners in the work of the school. Effective use of parent volunteers requires an exploration of parent values, existing competencies, and potential for training. An understanding of the home relationship can do much to facilitate effective utilization of parents in schools.

Whatever the factors motivating the study of parental relationships to reading development, it is apparent that unobtrusive, humane, objective, and natural qualities need to be incorporated into the research methodologies employed. Ethnography with its corresponding technique of participant observation offers these characteristics. Weintraub and Farr (1974-75) urge reading researchers to extend themselves beyond the traditional methodologies which have been used to achieve status in the scientific communities and to apply the methods of cultural anthropology, which permit the researcher to,"...study phenomena in the natural setting for the inquiry, and most important, they should allow issues to emerge as they are studied--that is they should begin with a presumption of ignorance."

The relationships of the home and the community provide the roots for learning which later flow into the school relationships. All of these relationships continuously affect the mastery of skills and concepts. (McDermott, 1976). To understand success and failure in reading, researchers will need to explore this total social organization both globally and specifically. Ethnographic methodology provides for this variation. Sherzer (1977) defines the method as, "...discovering and describing by means of a careful, intense study of face to face interaction, just what one needs to know in order to get along." This definition seems to attest to the significance of the sociocultural study of reading.

Principles of Ethnographic Research As Applied to the Parental Role in Reading

In presenting the principles of research design in field work, LeVine (1970) provides a useful framework for the study of the parental role in reading. He emphasizes some of the distinctive features of field research--investigation before determining research goals, formulation of relevant hypotheses, and use of methods which are susceptible to replication. He further outlines five aspects of research design.

I. Formulation of the Research Problem. As investigators prepare to study the parent, it is important that the research problem and subsequent hypotheses are con-

sistent with the dimensions and variations in the group or groups to be studied. LeVine suggests that the researcher must say, "What problems might be most fruitfully studied here?" It is often necessary for some observation to have taken place before precise hypotheses are formulated so that adequate testing of the hypotheses may be possible. LeVine notes that it is easier in the field to change the problem than the setting. This can be particularly true in instances of in-depth home interviews, taped recordings over time, and neighborhood parent surveys which cannot bear the expense and effort of repetition.

A strategy for developing the workable design is to test an array of hypotheses relevant to an area of interest, having at least some of these hypotheses geared to universal features which can be replicated. This is done prior to the formulation of more specific hypotheses. During this phase the ethnographer observing parents in home or group settings outside the home may wish to focus upon such aspects as communication modes. Preliminary questions to be posed might be:

1. What dialect variations are present in formal and informal speech?
2. What rules govern speech interaction between parent and children in terms of setting, social status, linguistic variety, and purpose?
3. What rules for social language exist which may impact on school behavior; for example, occasions of silences or ritualistic language.
4. How do nonverbal channels reinforce behavior?

How much transfer is there to the school setting?

Sufficiently general initial questions allow for refinement of the final hypotheses and may suggest more effective instruments for data collection.

II. Selecting An Area or Society to Study. A group to be studied (in this case a parental group) must furnish adequate testing of hypotheses with sufficient opportunities to observe variation on dimensions relevant to the problem. LeVine suggests that too much homogeneity may limit generalizability, with accidental observations being mistakenly connected. It is reasonable to conclude that if one were recording the types and quantities of printed materials found in home settings, one would need to survey a large and diversified population before relationships between amounts of materials and achievement in reading could be adequately compared. Size and sampling of field settings are considerations when a research question is to be answered. While a large and continuous sample may offer better opportunities for statistical analysis and generalizability, for such questions as parental value of reading, several smaller discrete and representative groups may be more efficient for observational study. This would be particularly true of linguistic or nonverbal observations which require consistent recording over time.

III. Exploratory Phase of Ethnography. During this important phase of study the participant observer attempts

to gather data of a variety of types which will enable him/her to make decisions as to what is worth recording and what is not. The goal of the ethnographer is to formulate hypotheses which are comprehensive, representing the spectrum of the cultural phenomenum, and replicable. The data should include conceptual, normative and terminological data as well as demographic or frequency data in order to produce an outline of the structure under study. An example of features which could be observed in a home setting to describe the communication interaction might be the following:

(ideational)
1. parent questioning format.
2. parent information-giving patterns.
3. Social language patterns used by children during conversation with parents.
4. nonverbal cues which curtail spontaneous child speech.

(material)
5. number of minutes the television is turned on during the child's waking hours.
6. number of books and magazines handled by the child during waking hours.

From these observations, the researcher may select relevant questions and can determine the range of the group required for testing the formal hypotheses.

IV. The Hypothesis Testing Phase. In this phase the ethnographer may make use of the basic research designs of the behavioral sciences, provided that he/she is conscious of five basic guidelines suggested by LeVine:

A. Multiplicity of instances. Enough of a phenomenon

must be present to observe variation. If dietary factors are being questioned in relation to reading, the specific factors should be present over a variety of social groups. A smaller group may be used if sufficient random variation in the phenomenon exists. Other procedures used to investigate a phenomenon comprehensively are historical instances or public records across time and space. Present and residual familial traits in reading disability could be studied effectively using these approaches.

B. Multiplicity of Indexes. Validity of observational research is improved when the several indicators are used to study a problem. As in the case study method, multiple indices permit the determination of the consistency and true existence of a phenomenon. For example, parental encouragement of language skills might be observed in situations providing stimulus for talk, writing, reading, listening, craft activity, cooking, and so forth.

C. Multiplicity of tests. LeVine suggests that, "The more sieves the hypothesis survives, the more confidence it deserves." Parental value of reading is a sensitive issue. To test it accurately, the researcher may use the open-ended interview, the well developed survey instrument, observation during parent group activities, and reports of children's perceptions of parental values. As in other research formats, the tools

used should be those most appropriate to the hypotheses being tested.

D. Multiplicity of Hypotheses. As described previously in the exploratory phase, hypotheses need to be formulated which do not restrict the observation of the phenomenon. LeVine suggests taking a rival hypothesis approach since it may be difficult to return to the field setting. This would be particularly true of observations in the home setting in which the researcher must be inconspicuous, yet an integral part of the cultural setting for a given period of time.

E. Multiplicity of Phase-Specific Conditions.

Consideration must be given in the development of ethnographic research design to factors which may exert external or internal influences over time. These include such factors as developmental growth, social or cultural interventions, immigration, or imposed conditions. LeVine indicates that both longitudinal and controlled cross-sectional methods may be used to investigate in a setting containing these factorial constraints.. What happens to reading growth, for example, when uppwardly mobile families move from inner city to the suburbs? Do mothers tend to reinforce dependency behaviors in developmentally immature children which transfer to the reading act? These may be questions which are sensitive to phase-specific conditions.

Summary.

The methodology and design of ethnography provides a viable framework for the study of the parental role in reading acquisition. The humanistic and natural approaches inherent in the method offer needed entrées into cultural settings which are reluctant to accept the researcher. Because the parent-child relationships are complex and not discrete, methods of studying them should be flexible and varied if the goal is validity of information. The participant observer as investigator has an obligation to be understanding of parent activities and interactions, remaining, however, both personnally involved and objective. Observations must fit the natural framework of parental behavior. Systematic use of this methodology should be very helpful in exploring the cultural aspects of reading.

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